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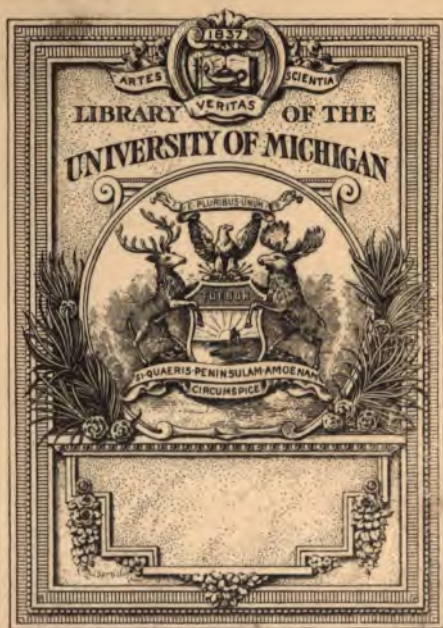
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THE SCHOLAR IN POLITICS

RICHARD OLNEY





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RICHARD OLNEY

THE SCHOLAR IN
POLITICS ❧ ❧ ❧

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BY HON. RICHARD OLNEY
SECRETARY OF STATE ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧

Philadelphia ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧
HENRY ALTEMUS
1896 ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧ ❧

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**HENRY ALTEMUS, MANUFACTURER
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THE SCHOLAR IN POLITICS.

*An Address delivered before the Alumni of
Brown University.*

IN responding to the flattering invitation of the Alumni Association, I may properly recognize at the outset its distinctive character as well as the class of topics specially befitting the occasion. This association does not exist without a worthy end in view, and does not meet year by year except in the effort to make some progress towards that end. What the end is, the nature of the association itself determines. Its members are part of the educated men of the country. They belong to the only privileged class which the institutions of the land tolerate, and they are clothed with the powers and burdened with the responsibilities necessarily inherent in every such class. If it be asked

what those powers and responsibilities are, the best definition of them, at once concise and exhaustive, is furnished by two words which have come down to us from the days of chivalry, and which no advance in the art of expression is likely to improve upon, *Noblesse oblige*—nobility compels—superiority in station and in power involves corresponding obligations. The true knight of chivalry, indeed, belonged to an order which may well be taken as justly typifying the privileged class of all ages and all countries so far as such a class can have a rightful existence or a legitimate sphere of action. His select destiny being recognized from his birth, the future knight began his probation in early youth, and until he came to man's estate never ceased to be the subject of rigid bodily and mental discipline. As he lived in an age when right and justice were foolishness unless championed by successful valor, he necessarily made ascendancy in arms a prime object of his care. But the peculiarity of his tuition consisted in the principles by which

his martial prowess when attained was to be guided. He was to spurn inglorious ease and pass his days in one round of laborious duty. He was to be moved neither by fear nor favor and was to be ruled solely by the voluntary promptings of his own heart and conscience. Without hope or thought of personal aggrandizement, he was to devote himself to public duties of transcendent importance—he was to champion the weak, to redress the wronged, to vindicate justice, and to oppose and defeat tyranny and oppression against all odds and at whatever sacrifice. In an age of the reign of physical force, when the many seemed to have come into the world ready saddled and bridled for the few to ride; when brute strength was lord paramount and even religion but slightly mitigated the harshness of its rule—in such an age the existence of a privileged class, animated by the sentiments and professing the principles of chivalry, formed a meliorating and civilizing influence, the value of which cannot be easily overestimated. Burke but justly characterized chiv-

alry as "the unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise." It unquestionably responded to the most urgent want of its own time. It tempered the lawlessness and cruelty of a semi-barbarous age. And in the principles it inculcated, however imperfectly applied in the day of their origin, every historian and philosopher finds the prolific seeds of modern civilization.

Chivalry, in its primary manifestations and in its original picturesqueness—the chivalry of prancing steeds and waving plumes, and glittering armor, of personal adventure and heroic feats of arms, of jousts and tournaments before high-born "ladies whose bright eyes rain influence and judge the prize"—chivalry of that form has forever disappeared.

"The knight's bones are dust,
His good sword is rust.
His soul is with the saints, I trust."

But though the form was fleeting, the essential principle of chivalry was permanent

and has never since failed to characterize the successive generations of the peoples whose national life was first colored and warmed and elevated by it. Its representatives exist to-day, and among us, and are to be found in none other than that class to which this association belongs ; the class, namely, of the educated men of the country. To no other class in this country and under our institutions does the legend *noblesse oblige* apply in all its force and in its only just sense. It is true that wealth is an instrument of tremendous power, and that our rich men in numbers and in the size of their vast private fortunes transcend the experience of any preceding age or country. It is true, too, that in a country absolutely without distinction of caste and where even official station confers but a temporary eminence, the rich are sometimes regarded—and I may say, without doing them injustice, sometimes regard themselves—as a superior order with indisputable claim to the lead and direction in society and in the State. But there could hardly be a more palpable



error and the class of the merely rich lacks the most essential qualities of a fit successor to an order of nobility, whose distinguishing traits were a recognized superiority, a disinterested devotion to high public duties, and a competency for their discharge acquired by elaborate and appropriate training. In all these indispensable characteristics the class of the merely rich is wanting. It is without the unquestioned and unquestionable supremacy because intellect rules the world and not any accumulation of material forces, however formidable ; because wealth is nothing but a tool, the value of which is in the skilled intelligence that uses it, and, like a two-edged sword, if ignorantly employed, is more than likely to mortally wound the hand that wields it. The class of the merely rich is further wanting in the vital matter of the dedication of itself to high public uses, a result almost inevitably consequent upon the general fact that the fortunes acquired by one generation are dispersed in the next, so that each begins for itself a new race for the same

W. H. U.

goal. For the same reason, because the struggle for wealth is absorbing and consumes all the energies of the best part of life, the merely rich must be without the knowledge and training necessary for the discharge of important public functions, even if they had the desire to undertake them. Any pretensions on their part, therefore, to be taken as the privileged class of to-day—as the true successors of the chivalrous knights of the feudal time—may be at once rejected. It is the educated men of the country who in these times and under American institutions alone combine the requisite qualities of such a privileged class. They only wear the crown of acknowledged supremacy. Who questions that the worthiest product of civilization is the trained and cultivated human intellect; that all accumulations of riches, all advancement in the comfort and luxury of living, all discoveries and improvements in the arts and sciences or in their application—that all these things are but means to an end, and that end the largest and highest development of intel-

lectual power? So the educated class conforms to the chivalrous type, not only in the special training and fitness for a select career, but in the disinterested assumption of public functions of the highest importance. In a world whose chief characteristic might hastily be pronounced to be its unmitigated selfishness, it requires a special effort of thought to realize how much gratuitous service in the interest of mankind is constantly rendered by its educated men. They furnish the scholars, the authors, the philosophers, the scientists, the artists, who, transported with zeal for some unknown or imperfectly conceived truth, give their lives to its pursuit, and are then only understood and valued when the revelation of some new law of nature or of life or of some hitherto hidden thing of beauty, to be a joy forever, proclaims the advent of a new benefactor of the race. The ministers of religion, now as in every past age the most removed from barbarism, are another illustration of a dominant and enlightened class, disinterestedly devoted to public func-

tions of the highest order, and if it be true that in these days there is a perceptible tendency to make the pecuniary rewards of the spiritual office in themselves an object of desire, the tendency only indicates the decline of faith and marks the radical incompatibility between high salaries and genuine piety. Not one whit behind either of these classes in the essential characteristics of a genuine privileged class—in no respect second either to the intellectual pioneers of the time or to the clergy—are the teachers of all grades, from the feminine instructor of the the class in the alphabet to the college president. I never knew one of the profession, whether of the highest or the lowest rank, that pecuniarily speaking was even half paid, and whose loyal service to the public was not largely in the nature of a charity. The chairs of our colleges are filled with men whose learning and trained mental faculties, as a rule of the most admirable sort, are yet, by the cash standards of the market place, hardly on a par with those of an expert

carpenter, or plumber, or bookkeeper—not to mention in the same day the new industry of baseball and the stipends of catchers and pitchers and shortstops. The teachers of the land, indeed of all degrees, if money standards are to be invoked, receive pittance so meagre compared with the intellectual force employed that, when the mode of life expected of them is also considered, all idea of a compensatory purpose or basis must be rejected, and the only object be deemed to be to keep them just about one remove from the actual starvation point. Yet they perform public functions of the first importance, and of the most far-reaching character. Their field of activity is not fenced within the bounds of the current time. They of course impress their personal qualities upon contemporaries in all the ways common to men of all callings. But they also reproduce them—they live again—in the minds of the succeeding generation which, committed to their charge in the formative days of youth, are then like wax to receive and like granite to retain the impres-

sions they put upon them. Thus their influence as a class is of the most comprehensive character, pervades all orders of society, not only affects the present but lays tangible hold upon the future, and is none the less potent that it is half unconsciously exercised by themselves, and only dimly seen and appreciated by others. And as the source and essence of their supremacy is trained intellectual force, as that force is disinterestedly devoted to public ends of the highest moment, their claim to that combination of qualities by which the genuine privileged class of our day must be distinguished is beyond doubt or cavil.

In these and other ways which there is not time to enlarge upon, the educated men of the country assert themselves as its true nobility and worthily discharge their responsibilities as such. My main purpose to-day, however, is not to note what is well done on their part. It is to call attention to their marked failure to assume and discharge certain functions clearly devolving upon them. The educated

men of the country are in flagrant default as respects its politics and its government. Of the facts there can be no doubt. They do not make good government one of the things they have in special charge and are bound to see accomplished; they do not intelligently and deliberately qualify themselves for the required service. None of our institutions of learning has a school of politics, none undertakes to graduate experts in the art of governing. They turn out hundreds of men theoretically skilled at least in divinity, law, medicine, philosophy, the mechanic arts, but never one instructed in the science of statesmanship as an independent field of human effort. The educated man in politics, or the scholar in politics as he is more generally termed, is a phenomenon to be half astonished and half amused at, and, as being one of those "literary fellows," is supposed to find his appropriate sphere in dancing attendance upon the idle ceremonies of a foreign court. In respect to the true worth and dignity of politics the educated class, if they have not shared, have

at least given countenance to the most pernicious error. In popular speech and popular thought, the pursuit of politics as a profession, instead of being an adoption of the most ennobling of vocations, is hardly respectable, and to say of a public man that he makes politics his business, is probably hardly less damaging to his political aspirations than to accuse him of arson or grand larceny. This degrading view of politics and the profession of politics the educated class is responsible for because it studiously stands aloof from politics and persistently neglects to prepare a suitable quota of its members for the discharge of political duties. The educated men in public life are not numerous at most. They are there for the most part only by way of having some diverting occupation for their declining years—only late in life and after their real life-work has been done, and after success at the bar or in business has satisfied their appetite for wealth or for fame—and they bring to their new duties only such scraps of knowledge and such bits of training as have

been accidentally picked up in the exercise of another calling. You may count on the fingers of one hand the number of men in high public station to-day who, at the outset, deliberately adopted politics for a career as they might have chosen law or medicine—who, having adopted it, then prepared themselves for it by appropriate study and training—and who can thus be justly said to bring to their important functions the requisite aptitude and knowledge.

If this be so, here is a most important department of thought and action which the educated class industriously neglects. That there are excuses for the neglect, palliations of it, may be readily admitted. In laying the foundation of our political institutions, the predominant sentiment of the fathers was jealousy of government. They regarded it, not as a beneficent agency, but as a necessary evil, whose capacity for mischief was boundless, and whose sphere was therefore to be circumscribed within the narrowest possible limits. In their eyes, there lurked dangers in

stable and efficient government too great to be offset by any possible resulting advantage. One outcome of this spirit was the principle of short terms of office—by which an official hardly makes himself familiar with his duties before his tenure comes to an end. Another outcome was the rule of rotation in office—the underlying idea of which is, that while a permanent band of office-holders may become conspirators against the liberties of the people, it can hardly become such if constantly changing, and constantly recruited from the ranks. Whether these precautions against tyranny were or were not suited to the particular end proposed, they were certainly admirably adapted to yet another end, and that is, to discredit politics as a vocation, and to repel educated men from the public service. How could that be reasonably chosen as a career, upon which one might never be allowed to enter? Or how could one devote the flower of his youth to becoming skilled in a profession, which, whatever his fitness, he might not be allowed to practice, or if at all, only

for short and uncertain intervals? Besides this incertitude of politics as a vocation—the risk that no degree of fitness will assure the opportunity to pursue it—the educated men of the country have been and undoubtedly are adverse to it from the sentiment of personal independence. The conception of public office as a public trust, however familiar to philosophers or to scholars, is, as a popular doctrine, novel and probably unintelligible. In the general belief and the general conviction, high political office is a thing of personal delight, gratification and emolument. The candidate who should announce from the stump that he had carefully fitted himself for the duties of the office, and that he sought it not for its salary nor for its money-making opportunities, but to gratify an honorable ambition by the use of his trained faculties in the service of his country and his kind, that candidate would either be stared at as a specimen of a new description of lunatic or otherwise would be peremptorily condemned as a consummate hypocrite. In the present

state of feeling and in the present state of culture on the subject, no aspirant to political station can hope to be deemed otherwise than self-seeking. However elevated his purposes and pure his motives, the great mass of voters are incapable of believing in them. They will give him their suffrages, if at all, only as a favor to him—only as something which lays him and not them under personal obligations. To a man of spirit, of ordinary self-respect even, the position is an offensively false one in which he will not willingly allow himself to be placed. And when to this apparent solicitation of personal favors is added the uncertainty of any permanent or even temporary results from it, it can readily be understood why the educated class practically abandons a sphere of action upon every rational ground preëminently its own.

Nevertheless, excuses are not exculpations. The path of duty is proverbially thorny, and the educated men of the country are not absolved from their legitimate responsibilities as respects its government by difficult or disa-

greeable incidents obstructing their discharge. If the popular conception of government is inadequate and unworthy, it is the educated class which is at fault as being the efficient source of public opinion, and it is the educated class that must remedy the evil by creating and substituting a just for a false public sentiment. In that direction some notable advance has already been made. Whether through the conscious effort of the educated class or without it, the governmental idea of 1776 and 1789 has in these days certainly undergone a radical change. The disposition to regard government like sickness or death—as an ill which flesh is inevitably heir to, to be therefore watched with sleepless eye and repressed with unrelenting hand—has been greatly modified. After a hundred years of popular institutions, it has begun to be seen that government, instead of being branded as an enemy and kept in chains, may well be regarded as a desirable friend, as a useful servant, which, like fire or air or any elemental force, only needs to be

understood and well ordered and confined within its proper sphere to become the positive fountain of blessings of the highest value. Of this revolution in the fundamental conception of government—as well as of the liability of every new theory to be pushed to extremes—there could be no more striking and curious illustration than the current doctrines of democratic socialism by which individual independence of thought and action is reduced to the minimum—by which private property is abolished and the state becomes the one great and sole proprietor—and by which, in the interest and for the good of the community as a whole, government is made to signify the control and regulation of the most minute and private concerns of every individual. This comparatively modern view of government is in no way allied to paternalism—it is still government by the people themselves, but government regarded not as a curse but a blessing, not as an infliction to be confined within the smallest bounds, but as a beneficent agency capable of great and in-

definite expansion. The theory, whatever its reasonable limitations, has merits that cannot be ignored, and not among the least of them is its unmistakable tendency to break down the barriers between the educated class and political service. If government be an institution for the accomplishment of positive good, with functions increasing in extent and variety as the progress of civilization makes the wants of the community more numerous and more complex, the demand for administrators of the highest order of intelligence with faculties thoroughly trained for their work becomes more and more imperative. If government needs in its officers the intellectual aptitude and skill which only special preparation and experience can confer, short terms of office and rotation in office, as rules for their selection, are little less than absurd. If government be a trust for the discharge of which there must be fitness as well as fidelity, every man may equip himself for its duties with a well-founded hope and expectation of such a career as his merits justify.

If government be a trust from whose performance is excluded every idea of personal emolument, the aspirant to office may find another preferred to him, but can lose neither personal independence nor his own self-respect by a candidacy founded on no other claim than that of superior fitness and having no other end than the satisfaction of a laudable aspiration to fill high public stations with honor to himself and profit to his country. Thus there has taken root and is growing a conception of government which must materially lessen the aversion of educated men to political duties. As it greatly enlarges the sphere of government, it also makes more apparent the imperative obligations of educated men as respects its administration. As the genuine privileged class of our time, political functions are theirs of right and for their usurpation and unworthy discharge by others, educated men are deservedly censurable. Political functions belong to them because of the paramount importance of right government; because with it is bound up the

weal and woe of individuals and communities as it is with no other human agency or institution. They belong to them because of the magnitude and difficulty and complexity of the problems they present; which involve human nature in every interest and under every aspect; which the highest human wisdom may wrestle with for ages only to make a record of humiliating failures; and to which whosoever essays to solve them should devote his life and must bring faculties equipped for their task by thorough and systematic special training. Political functions belong to the educated class for the additional and equally cogent reason that whoever receives them must be disinterested both in truth and as a fact seen and known of all men. It is not uncommonly urged, as a remedy for existing evils, to get better men at the head of affairs and thus to secure better government, that all important political offices should have larger pecuniary rewards attached to them. It is said that the workman is worthy of his hire and the workman for the public no less than the

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workman in private employment, and that the statesman who, after elaborately qualifying himself for the special task, brings commanding abilities to the public business, is entitled to the same remuneration in dollars and cents as if the business were private. But the argument is misplaced and the analogy a mistaken one. Political service of the first rank is like intellectual effort in many other departments—it cannot be bought or sold; it has no market value; it is without price in every sense. But it is also true of political service of a really high order that disinterestedness is an essential element of its real value. “Deliver us from temptation” is no less the language of worldly wisdom than of the inspired world. Human nature being what it is, if political office were paid according to the importance of the intellectual qualities called into play, who would dare guarantee, however sure of his motives, the integrity of his judgment? Who might not well feel that the pecuniary rewards of his place were a snare, making that seem the straight and

narrow path of the public welfare which was in reality only the tortuous course of office-getting and office-holding for the office's sake? If the public man ought always to be sure of himself, it is of at least equal importance that others should be sure of him also. He must not only be wise, but influential. His counsels must not only be just, but must be accepted. In other words, he must be able to form and shape public opinion—that invisible and intangible force which under popular institutions irreversibly decides the fate of men and of measures. But whoever would mould or control public opinion must be absolutely free from any suspicion of selfish motives. He must not only be disinterested in fact, but must be such so clearly that even the shafts of calumny cannot reach him. Otherwise, the highest statesmanship may pass for nothing but the most vulgar self-seeking, and words of the purest wisdom fall as water upon the sand.

Thus the political duties of the educated class as a whole are plain. There is, how-

ever, a variety of the class upon which those duties are specially incumbent. Education does not imply wealth. On the other hand, in the great majority of instances, it does imply the absence of grinding poverty—it does imply a condition of life which is not a mere hand to mouth contest for daily bread—it does imply sufficient relief from mere physical wants to enable spiritual cravings to be felt and attended to. But to a portion of the educated class much more than this is granted. Time was, when, practically speaking, we were without men of leisure. As a distinct species they had no existence on our soil, and with such few exceptions as only proved the rule, every man had a profession or business which he pursued, not for diversion nor to kill the time, but as the serious object of life. That time has passed away not to return. The American citizen who finds himself born into the world with wealth so large that any increase must mean increase of care, but cannot mean increase of happiness, is no longer obliged to cross three thousand miles of water

in search of comrades. They already abound in this country and every year graduate in increasing numbers from our colleges. They are indeed of the favored of the earth. Their morning of life, with no want unheeded and no pleasure denied, given to bodily and mental growth under such restraints as only impart a zest to existence, truly represents that kingly state of youth which poets sing—

“When meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light;
The glory and the freshness of a dream.”

Their lines are fallen in an age and country in which neither superstition nor political tyranny fetters the intellectual powers nor impedes their freest and fullest exercise. Heirs of all the centuries that have gone before, they have at their command whatever science has discovered or art has accumulated, while books and travel and institutions of learning and intercourse with the choice spirits of the time put in their hands all the elements of

the highest human felicity. Like the prince of the happy valley, they are in danger of becoming miserable, because they either want nothing or know not what they want. For such as these, for all certainly whom special gifts and special tastes do not direct to special fields of effort, politics offers a natural outlet and an appropriate career. Both personal and patriotic considerations combine to urge it upon them. Its pursuit is inspiring and ennobling in itself, gives scope for the use of the largest mental powers, and is calculated to satisfy the most exalted ambition. At the same time, the indispensable means of unique and grand success are peculiarly theirs—unlimited opportunities for all proper training and for the acquisition of all necessary knowledge, and a disinterestedness beyond the possibility of suspicion. As compared with them, indeed, the man of narrow means enters upon the race most heavily handicapped. According to Lord Bacon, "the best works and of greatest merit for the public have proceeded from the unmarried or child-

less men." "He that hath wife and children," he says, "hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief." But as such impediment poverty is at least equally potential with wife and children while destitute of their compensations. He who must take thought how he will lodge or dine on the morrow necessarily lacks that concentration of thought and purpose upon one object which is the main element in its successful pursuit. Sordid cares must consume the time and waste the energies which the inheritor of affluence is free to devote to whatever lofty aim in life he has chosen to set before him. If he is well taught, he will learn, if he is wise, he will instinctively realize, that of all forms of human misery none exceeds in wretchedness the lot of the mere idler—that labor is the fundamental basis of human happiness and the devotion of all the energies to a worthy end the ideal condition of human life. For the fortunate youth, therefore, whose choice and pursuit of a

career are unhampered by the necessity of providing for mere physical wants, and whose mental constitution does not incessantly impel him into this or that other department of labor, politics presents a fit and adequate field for the exertion of all his energies. In entering upon it he may well consider not merely his own personal interests, nor merely even the gratification of a noble aspiration to lay his country and his kind under lasting obligations. He may properly regard himself as simply discharging an imperative duty. *Noblesse oblige*. Possession of power in the shape of wealth, or in whatever form, and however acquired, calls upon the holder for something that shall justify the possession. The idea that a man may pile up or hold mountains of wealth and be accountable for its use to himself alone is obsolete—is buried with a past age never to be resurrected. For a witness, see the whole world of labor now a seething mass of discontent, not merely because "there is little to earn and many to keep," not merely because men are sometimes

houseless and starving, and women and children sometimes overworked and ill-fed, but because of radical revolt from that constitution of modern society which dooms the great majority of mankind to unremitting physical toil, but permits an insignificant fraction to enjoy in idleness all the sweets of existence, to spend what they have not earned, and to reap where they have not sown. The murmurs of the multitude, which once could be heard only with ear to the ground, now ascend to thrones, and vex even the ears of monarchs. They beat the air with complaints rather than state a remedy, which evidently only posterity, and perhaps a distant posterity, is likely to supply. What it will be, what new order of things the future has in store, it is in vain to forecast or predict. But it would seem to be certain that if the doctrine of private property is to survive, it must be supplemented by the rule that a man cannot live for himself alone; that public uses attach to him and to all his possessions; and that the greater his gifts and

the greater his material wealth, the more incumbent it is upon him to justify and deserve his title by commensurate public services.

Unless these views are mistaken, a duty rests upon the educated men of the country which they have hitherto neglected, which they have not recognized as being their duty, and for the performance of which they have not systematically and conscientiously prepared themselves. The first step towards its due discharge obviously is to provide men that are fit for it and is consequently to be taken by our institutions of learning. It is for them to treat politics as the honorable vocation it in truth is and to aim to prepare men for its pursuit as they do for any other life work. They can in no way render greater service either to this or to future generations than by thus contributing to bring educated men to the front as regards the performance of all important political functions. Of what avail is it to require a learned profession to construe and administer the laws, if ignorance and unworthiness are to preside at their birth?

To perpetuate existing political conditions and tendencies is to permit the current of the national life to be poisoned at its very source. It is now nearly a generation since I stood in this place as one of the graduating class about to begin that journey which to the boyish eye seems to lie only through green fields and a smiling landscape, but which the gathering years find encompassed with clouds and darkness, ever growing heavier and more oppressive as the end draws near. During that time very many evils have been impressed upon my attention from which the community and each of its members have greatly and wrongly suffered and continue to suffer.

Yet, if I ask myself which of them all has been most extensive and pernicious in its influence, I find none which seems to me to compare for a moment with misgovernment. To take a single illustration now a quarter of a century old, what but long-continued misrule then split this nation into hostile camps; devoted the flower of its youth and the pride of its manhood to the sword and the ravages

